

The Rise and Fall of Buxton

In the decade of the eighties the town of Muchakinock, five miles south of Oskaloosa, in Mahaska County, was a flourishing coal mining community. About that time the Consolidation Coal Company, a subsidiary of the Chicago and North Western Railway Company, became interested in Iowa coal, and sent its agent, J. E. Buxton, to Muchakinock to purchase coal. Eventually, he was succeeded by his son, Ben C. Buxton.

When laborers at these mines became scarce because of strikes and increased demands for labor, H. A. "Hobe" Armstrong, a resident of Muchakinock, and other agents of the company went to Virginia to induce Negroes to come and work in the Iowa mines. Negro miners came also from Kentucky and Tennessee, and presently Muchakinock had a large colored population.

For the transportation of coal from this area, the Chicago and North Western Railway had run a branch from its main line at Belle Plaine, southwestward to What Cheer, thence to Muchakinock and Lakonta. When the mines at Muchakinock ceased to be profitable the railroad extend-

ed its tracks farther southward just over the line into Monroe County, and Ben Buxton and his miners, both white and colored, moved by train in a body, and founded the town of Buxton, about twelve miles north of Albia.

During the first decade of the twentieth century Buxton became one of the largest coal-mining towns west of the Mississippi River. Its population of approximately five thousand was about half white and half colored. In 1906 the Regal Coal Company, the Ackers Coal Company, and mines Nos. 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14 of the Consolidation Coal Company were located near Buxton. The output from these mines that year was 1,183,143 tons of coal. This made Monroe County the largest coal-producing county in Iowa.

At that time and in the years immediately following, Buxton was reputed to be the largest unincorporated town in the United States. There was no city government — no mayor, no council, no police force. Order was maintained, insofar as order prevailed, by township and county officers, chiefly constables and deputy sheriffs.

Rowdyism and violence prevailed throughout the town. Murders were not rare. Holdups and robberies were common, and assaults were frequent. A former resident refers to the town as a modern Sodom and adds: "People think I am

telling a cock and bull story when I tell them what I saw in Buxton. But it's the truth."

But Buxton was not wholly bad even in those days. There were churches of various denominations — one maintained by colored Methodists, one supported by white Methodists, a Swedish Lutheran Church, and a church for colored folk of the Baptist faith. Schools were maintained for both white and colored pupils. Usually they were not segregated. At one time Buxton had a thoroughly mixed high school, with a Negro superintendent and a Negro principal, with teachers of both races, and with both white and black pupils attending.

When Buxton was at its height, no other town in Iowa could boast of so many professional and business people of the colored race. Mrs. Minnie B. London, for many years a teacher in the Buxton schools, writes: "Doctors, lawyers, teachers, druggists, pharmacists, undertakers, clerks, the Postmaster, Justice of the Peace, Constable, members of the School Board, and what have you" were of Negro blood. There were, of course, physicians, ministers, lawyers, teachers, merchants, mechanics, and miners of the white race, too, for Buxton was a thoroughly mixed community. There, too, as in other towns, good and evil influences existed side by side. No one race or

group was responsible for all the evil influences, nor was any one race or group to be credited with all the good. Rather the good and the evil, like the white and colored population, was scattered throughout the town.

Various parts of the town or "camp", as it was commonly called, were given characteristic names. "East Swede Town" and "West Swede Town" designated areas in which Swedish immigrants predominated. Another section of town was called "Gobblers Nob"—just why, no one seemed to know. "Sharp End" applied to the "sudden termination of the town to the south". In that area was Ike Hutchinson's drug store where Mrs. Hattie Hutchinson, said to be the only colored woman registered pharmacist in Iowa, filled prescriptions. Coopertown, named in honor of B. F. Cooper, another Negro druggist, was located to the north on the Mahaska County line. But these areas were all parts of the Buxton community.

News of local interest appeared in the *Gazette*, the *Advocate*, and the *Bulletin*, which were published weekly in Buxton at different times. When Mrs. London wrote her reminiscences for the Howard Newspaper Syndicate in 1940, her descriptions of the unique community were as circumstantial as the items that might have been read during the decade from 1906 to 1916 in the

columns of these papers. For example: "Manie Lobbins had a livery barn in the Sharp End, and since this was in the horse and buggy days no one was required to take Hobson's choice.

"If you wanted coffee like your mother made, you would go to the Rising Sun Restaurant in Coopertown, operated by Mrs. Anna Lobbins. She would serve you a hot lunch or a complete dinner at reasonable prices.

"Peter Carey's barber shop was also in this section, located across from Cooper's store. He was always in whenever one wanted a hair cut or shave.

"The hair dressing, manicuring, face massage, and chiropody were all done by Madam Ella Yancy. She was an honor graduate of the New York College of Hairdressing. Madam Yancy was Buxton's best specialist in scalp treatment. 'If your hair won't grow, won't straighten, all you have to do is to see Madam Yancy and find out the reason and get a remedy'; and 'If your wrinkles won't leave and your cheeks won't fill out, see Madam Yancy'; and 'If your corns bother you and just won't stop hurting, see Madam Yancy'.

"Near the depot Anderson Perkins and Son operated a hotel and confectionary. They advertised good meals and first class service. Hotel rates \$1 and \$1.50.

"If you desired an old fashioned meal and did not wish to go home or bother to cook on a hot day, all you had to do was to stop in the Jeffers Restaurant, run by Andy Jeffers and his wife Maggie.

"Peter Abington, the caterer, kept his wagon on the street all day long selling ice cream, pies, bread, butter and eggs.

"Lewis Reasby had a hamburger stand in front of the Y. M. C. A. His comical manner of crying his wares would attract passers-by who would stop to listen to him, then find themselves thrusting their hands into their pockets and saying, 'A hot dog please'."

The Y. M. C. A. was a large three-story building built expressly for the colored miners by the coal company. Though slow to be accepted, it eventually became a popular center of recreation. At one time this was reputed to be "the largest Negro Y. M. C. A. in the country" with a membership of about three hundred. The third floor was occupied by the rooms of many secret societies, for nearly every adult belonged to one or more. "When a member died his lodge would turn out in full regalia. The funeral procession would be headed by the band playing a funeral dirge all the way to the cemetery." The Buxton Negro Concert Band was famous throughout southern Iowa.

Under the leadership of F. E. Goggins, it had frequent engagements in surrounding towns, playing at fairs and on other occasions.

The second floor of the Y. M. C. A. was occupied by a spacious auditorium, with a stage and dressing rooms. There the Langois sisters, better known as the "French women", displayed motion pictures every night, which afforded enjoyable recreation for the miners and their families. Road shows as well as motion pictures were featured in the auditorium — among them *East Lynne* and the *Count of Monte Christo*. Among the negro characters who entertained packed houses were Booker T. Washington, Hallie I. Brown, Blind Boone, and Roscoe Conklin Simmons.

The homes of the miners at Buxton were owned by the coal company. They were usually five or six-room frame structures, "each built on about a quarter acre of land so that the miners could have a cow, chickens, pigs, and small gardens". The streets were irregular, "following the lay of the land". There were "no sidewalks to speak of", and of course no city treasury and no city engineer. There were, however, a few electric lights, and a telephone office. Three company doctors took care of the sick and injured, but they had no hospital facilities. Under the auspices of the company, an association was organized whereby sin-

gle men for seventy-five cents a month and married men for \$1.50 could have medical attention.

Ben C. Buxton was social minded, though rather paternalistic. "He would offer prizes for the best kept yards and gardens. At each Christmas season for a time he would give a turkey and a basket of groceries to each family — white and colored — and some years a gallon of fine syrup from his father's estate in Vermont". He also tried to prevent trouble by forbidding saloons on company property. Although saloons were not permitted in the town of Buxton or in Monroe County, liquor could be obtained at the drug stores. Moreover, saloons flourished just north of Buxton, over the Mahaska County line.

A big general company store was operated by W. A. Wells, a brother-in-law of Ben Buxton, and the company meat market was under the direction of "Hobe" Armstrong. For both the store and the meat market there was a credit plan and "a check off system" whereby charge accounts were deducted from the miner's pay. No cash was needed. As goods were ordered, the clerks punched the amount on the customer's credit card. The total sum was then withheld on the next pay day. The miners, however, were not compelled to buy at the company store. "Everything is kept there from wedding garments to coffins", com-

mented a reporter in 1910. "They have a system that takes every penny to the cashier's desk like in the biggest houses in Chicago."

On the night of February 21, 1911, a fire of unknown origin destroyed the "big store" and its contents, causing a loss estimated at from \$100,000 to \$150,000. Food supplies were shipped in carload lots from Oskaloosa to meet immediate demands. Although the store was soon rebuilt and stocked with new goods, it never was as prominent in the life of the community as the old store had been. At night, after the miners had cleaned up and eaten supper, they used to gather at the store to smoke and visit. There was no objection to loafing. The manager preferred to have the men hang around the store instead of spending their time and money at the saloons.

In busy seasons the miners made big wages. They were paid in gold and silver. "It was a common thing to see a man with a twenty dollar gold coin on his watch chain." As a rule the young men were well dressed. Many of them wore tailor-made clothes and some had high silk hats for special occasions. They spent freely. A former resident observed that as soon as they had a few dollars in the bank, they would "go to Albia and buy out the town".

In 1913 mine No. 18 was opened a few miles

south of Buxton. It was believed that it would last for twenty years. The equipment was extensive, modern, and powerful. "Eight boilers were necessary to furnish steam, and an engine room filled with dynamos, steam turbines and hoisting engines occupied almost a half block." At this new mine "Billy Llewellyn hung up his hoisting record of 3,774 tons of coal in eight hours".

Meanwhile, the Chicago and North Western Railway Company had extended its tracks southwestward to Bucknell and Haydock and these towns attracted business that had formerly gone to Buxton. Then came the first World War. The railroad company not only abandoned its plans for further extension, but removed its equipment from Haydock, closed the mines at Bucknell, and stopped the train several miles short of the terminal.

During the war, however, the demand for coal was so great that the Consolidation Coal Company was forced to sacrifice everything for production. Accordingly, the big mine No. 18, worked overtime. The peak of coal production in Iowa was reached in 1917 when over nine million tons were mined, nearly a fourth of it in Monroe County. After the war, however, the business depression, increased competition with Illinois and Kentucky coal, and the decline of railroad

transportation severely reduced production. Labor trouble developed. On March 15, 1927, No. 18 closed, six years before its estimated time. Fifteen days later, No. 19, a 1950-ton mine shut down with the declaration of a strike. Two years later more than a hundred cars of coal were still waiting at the bottom to be hoisted.

Meanwhile, the Consolidation Coal Company was disposing of its Buxton property estimated in value at \$2,000,000. Company-owned miners' homes were being sold for fifty dollars each, while "junk men" were "awaiting the results of their bids on the remains at the Buxton No. 18 — once the largest mine in Iowa."

In October, 1929, the Oskaloosa *Times*, commenting on conditions in Buxton reported: "The four winds called to the population and last year it literally melted away. The banking and business houses began closing. School opened in the fine high school this year with only a few pupils and one school building entirely unused . . . Like some ancient village in the jungle, the weeds and undergrowth are creeping in on Bucknell and Haydock. Today they are standing in the lobby of the movie theatre; six months from now nature will reclaim its own, and only a few foundations, a ramshackle store or two, will mark the glory which was once only Buxton's."

Alas, how true the prophecy!

As a precaution of safety in June, 1944, the Hercules Powder Company of Chicago used twelve pounds of dynamite, set at the base of the 155-foot stack at Buxton mine No. 18 to level it to earth. Erected in 1918 at a cost of \$10,000, the giant stack had served its day. Made of concrete and steel, the stack fell gracefully to the ground "and shattered within inches of the opening of the shaft". The debris was used to fill the shaft of what had been one of Iowa's greatest mines.

With the closing of the mines, Buxton became a deserted village. For the most part the area is now a cornfield. Cement foundations of the old store remain. An eroding embankment marks what was once a busy railroad. The large stone warehouse with its red tile roof still stands, but it too is now badly weathered. Yonder in the low lands are the remains of the old vault — a once substantial brick structure where great quantities of gold and silver were stored, and from which the miners received their bi-weekly pay. This brick and stone structure, like old Buxton, itself, is all but gone.

Perhaps the most significant landmark in all this area is one that is not made of brick, or stone, or steel. Rather it is a work of art. Upon the

highlands of what was once East Swede Town, the Swedish Lutheran Church, a substantial frame structure, still stands. But it is now a typical rural church with little of outward appearance to attract the attention of passers-by. Inside the church, however, just over the altar, and facing the congregation as they sit in the wooden pews, is a beautiful painting, seven by eleven feet in dimensions, with a background of blue, representing Christ in Gethsemane. It was painted by Birger Sandzen in 1904, when Buxton was a flourishing mining town. Today Buxton is gone. Only the church with its beautiful painting remains.

No, Buxton is not entirely gone. Ancient Rome fell, but it still lives in history. Buxton, as a town, with its boasted material wealth and prosperity is gone. Yet there is a hint of immortality even in a deserted mining camp. In history and in memory Buxton still lives.

Look backward across the years to the time when Muchakinock was a flourishing mining town, before Buxton was founded. A colored lad, E. A. Carter, was the son of a coal miner, and he himself worked in the mines. Young Carter was resolved to get an education. He attended the State University of Iowa, graduating in Liberal Arts and Medicine. For the practice of his pro-

fession he located at Buxton where he became assistant and then chief surgeon for the North Western Railway Company and the Consolidation Coal Company in that community. Now he is a prominent physician and surgeon in Detroit, Michigan.

Another outstanding Negro citizen of Buxton was Attorney George H. Woodson, who practiced law there for twenty years, and served his people so well that he was nominated by the Republicans for the office of State Representative — the only Negro ever so honored by a major party in Iowa. Other prominent residents of Buxton, both colored and white, might be mentioned, but these will suffice to show that memories of Buxton still live.

Many people throughout Iowa and neighboring States recall mining interests and activities at Buxton. Indeed, in recent years, it has been the custom to hold an annual reunion at the site of this once flourishing mining town. Former residents of Buxton come from Sioux City, Council Bluffs, Des Moines, and other cities, and, indeed, from other States to observe the annual festivities and to recall the days of prosperity and adversity — the rise and fall of Buxton.

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